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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/04/2018  
TAGS: PGOV MCAP VE  
SUBJECT: SLOWLY SINKING: ARMADA SOCIALISTA I-2008

Classified By: Robert Downes Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Venezuelan Navy (Armada) released broad details regarding "Armada Socialista I-2008", a series of military exercises and civic action programs involving the Navy, Territorial Guard (GT), Army and Air Force (FAV) during the month of June. The highlight will be the first firing of a missile from one of the recently purchased Russian Su-30 FLANKER jets. The previous iteration of Armada Socialista featured a simulated coastal defense against a U.S.-type amphibious landing. Critics of the BRV noted that more than 50% of the expected Territorial Guards did not report for duty and many who did report drilled without equipment or weapons. Retired admirals told PolOff that the Navy's poor state of material readiness and Chavez' willingness to use sailors as labor for his social projects is grinding down morale. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Venezuelan Navy announced via their website that an assortment of civic action programs and military exercises under the heading Armada Socialista I-2008 would commence in June. According to exercise commander Vice Admiral Luis Alberto Morales Marquez, events would include weapons systems verifications, humanitarian outreach, national development projects, an Army artillery exercise, and an FAV live fire exercise involving a missile from a Venezuelan Su-30 FLANKER. (Note: Chavez announced on television that he was undergoing training to ride in the two-seat multi-role jet and fire the first missile. End Note) The regional newspaper "El Carobobeno" reported on May 26 that an amphibious landing involving the General Carlos Soublette naval infantry brigade under the command of RADM Belisario Martinez would occur somewhere along the coast as part of the exercise. The article also mentioned that RADM Moises Navarro would command the amphibious task force.

¶3. (C) The prior naval exercise, Armada Socialista II-2007, had an amphibious landing and featured a simulated coastal defense with active duty and civilian militias known as the Territorial Guard (GT). According to Rocio San Miguel of the watchdog NGO Citizen Control, less than half of the expected GT members reported for duty. Retired admirals Rafael Huizi of the NGO Institutional Military Front and Elias Buchszer of the NGO Orion Foundation told PolOff that not only had turnout been low, but many of those who did report were without uniforms or equipment and were handed sticks when rifles were not available.

¶4. (C) Buchszer and Huizi explained that while civil action projects had been part of the Navy during their tenure, naval operations had first priority. According to the former admirals, only two of Venezuela's six LUPO class frigates are operational, both Type 209 submarines remained in overhaul

and the Venezuelan naval academy's tall sailing ship had remained pier-side for the last five years. The admirals asserted that Chavez' willingness to use the Navy as a manpower pool for his various social programs is dulling their skills and wearing down their esprit de corps.

¶5. (C) Comment: Armada Socialista is likely to be a re-run of the 2007 version, with the notable exception of the Su-30 missile launch. However, even if the FAN learns from their previous mistakes and have more GT units mobilized with field equipment and weapons, the poor material readiness of ships, the lack of meaningful training for active